GOD HAS MANY NAMES:
1. DOES IT MATTER WHAT YOU CALL GOD?

November 11, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 25:1-13
Exodus 3:1-15

"'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And then he blessed him."
-Genesis 32:29 (NRSV)

A name is a powerful thing.

"Sticks and stones will break
your bones but names will never
hurt you..."

Our parents told us when we were verbally assaulted by the bully down the block, and although the intent was sincere, the sentiment is not true. Names do hurt you. Names affirm you. Names lift your spirit, or cause a descent into an abyss of self doubt.

Names it could be said, have power to create.

No project assumes more discussion, research and intentionality than choosing a name for the baby.

Will it work if she is a concert pianist and her name is introduced on stage at Carnegie Hall?

Or what if he is a tailback for the Bears and the name is thundered across the autumn sky on the PA system?

What if she writes a book on management theory and her name is in the window of every book store?

What if she runs for President and her name is on every bumper sticker?

To name something is to participate in a mysterious way in behaviors which will influence the future. When God gives Adam the authority to give names to the animals in the Garden of Eden, the human race is indelibly and forever brought into the process of creation.

Some people are saying that the way we name God leaves them out. Actually they have been saying it with varying degrees of intensity for a thousand years. Some are saying that if the only name you have for God is a masculine name, or a feminine name, or a warrior name, or a soft and gentle name, or a judging name, they feel left out of the conversation.

And, the theologians know they are right... that the one and only thing you can ever know for sure about God, is that God, being God, is unknowable and therefore unnameable. And furthermore, if you only have one name - or if your God is male, or female, or a judge, or warrior, exclusively you are missing what the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition have to say about God.

God has many names. And in the weeks ahead we will be thinking about some of them. In the pew racks are copies of a new Brief Statement of Faith which is currently before the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for consideration. Some of those names are part of that Brief Statement. The chair of the committee which produced this statement was Jack Stotts, President of Austin Theological Seminary, former President of McCormick Theological Seminary, good friend of Fourth Church, who served it as interim preacher in 1984 and 1985. Dr. Stotts will be a guest preacher here in February and will also be delivering several lectures on the Brief Statement. I have heard him say that one of the most important tasks before the church is to learn how to say "God" in the modern world.

So that is the project before us, and I invite you to begin by pondering the question, "Does It Matter What You Call God?" And to do that pondering, not in the abstract, nor in the sometimes overheated debate about inclusive language, but in light of a story which comes to us from the distant past.

It's a marvelous story. It's about a man by the name of Moses who has finally settled down to a quiet and predictable life as a sheep herder. Up until this time his life has been a bit of a roller coaster ride. Abandoned by his parents as an infant in order to save his life, rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, raised as Egyptian royalty, a rising young star in the Egyptian Civil Service and then, suddenly, one day, an outlaw, hiding from justice. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and in anger he killed the Egyptian and ran for his life. It was during that escape in the wilderness that he met his future wife, moved in with her family, became a parent and went into business with his father-in-law. And watching the sheep one day his life, and human history, are forever changed.

A burning bush, a voice: "remove your shoes.. I'm the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And then a plan, an outrageous, foolhardy scheme to liberate the Jewish slaves back in Egypt. "I have come down to deliver them," says the voice. "I have heard their cry... come, I will send you to bring them out."

Isn't that something? Just when he's finally settled; just when he's started a family, has a little money in the bank; just when he can see a little light at the end of the tunnel, maybe even an improvement in his golf score... there is this voice and this incredible plan. "I will send you to Pharaoh."

Moses' response is understandable. "Who me? Why me? Who am I that I should go?" That's the cue for the voice to say something like: "Moses, you're perfect for the job. You're bright, intelligent, physically strong, you know your way around Egypt, speak the language, have contacts, besides you have unrealized human potential which you never touched."

The voice doesn't say that however. What the voice says is, "I will be with you."

Next question... that isn't the answer I wanted, but say I go; say I go to Egypt and tell the slaves about the plan, and they ask me who sent me, what shall I tell them? "What's your name?"

And the voice said: "I am who I am.... Tell them 'I am' has sent me to you."

"What kind of a name is that?" Woody Allen once asked, and it is a good question. There are few incidents or phrases in the Bible that have received as much scholarly research and attention.

The language itself could not be more difficult. So let's roll up our sleeves for a moment and take a look. The ancient Jews regarded God with so much awe that God's name was never pronounced. In Hebrew it is four consonants - YHWH - and here, in the third chapter of Exodus, what seems to happen is that the vowels from the Hebrew word for Lord are woven into these mysterious consonants so that the result is a word that sounds like Yahweh, and that is actually a kind of verb, the basic linguistic unit called the "be" verb. In English it translates:

"I am who I am" - but that's not the only possibility. Reputable Biblical scholars argue that God's name is -

I am because I am, or

I will be what I will be, or

I am the one who is, or

I will be present, or

I will create what I will create, or

I will be what I become.

All of them possible: variations on the verb "to be."

What's really going on here? Why doesn't God have a name? Why doesn't this God - this God of the ancestors have a proper name like all the other gods? The people who study these texts agree that what we have here is an intentional and "purposeful act of ambiguity by the writer to leave open a wide range of possibilities." [J. Coert Ryllarsdam, IB, Vol. I]

The anthropologists know that the ancients believed they lived in a world inhabited by many spirits. And if the spirits could be named they could be understood; and if understood perhaps even controlled, or at least people would not feel quite so frighteningly helpless in the presence of these unseen and mysterious forces. The impetus to give God a proper name, one interpretation proposes, is an expression of the primal human need to have God at our disposal. [Biblical Interpretations in Preaching, Gerhard Von Rad, p. 42]

It comes up other places in the tradition. When Jacob wrestles all night at the Jabbock with a mysterious stranger who turns out to be God, he asks for a name and what he gets is a blessing and a limp, and a new name for himself, but no name for God. Later when Moses raises the subject again, God tells him he can see God's backside but not God's face.

The ancient Jews knew something important, namely that if you think you know too much about God you not only don't know a thing, that little piece you know begins to feel like the whole piece... and now you have an idol on your hands. An idol is one small piece of truth. And the trouble with idols (in addition to being very expensive to maintain, you have to build shrines for them and hire people to protect them and polish them) is that they keep you from dealing with the real thing.

So instead of a nice respectable proper name, what Moses gets is intentional ambiguity and, of course, the promise - and that's really the point. The God Moses is dealing with is the one who will be with him as he goes down to Egypt to perform his impossible mission. Hans Kung writes:

> "Yahweh means, 'I will be present guiding, helping, strengthening, liberating"
> [Does God Exist?, p. 13]

Let's come back now to our starting point. We do know something about the power of names, for good or for ill. In a recent editorial in The Christian Century, James Wall points out that the PBS documentary, "The Civil War" was offensive to some people because the name "Civil War" is the name given to the conflict by the side that won. The losing side calls it "The War Between the States." Similarly, Wall points out, Israeli anger and intransigence in the aftermath of the killing of Arab demonstrators by Israeli police and the universal criticism which ensued, is due, in part, to the fact that the United Nations insists on calling the spot where it took place by its Palestinian name - Haran al-Sharif. The Israeli name, used in the American Press is "Temple Mount." What name you use tells what side you are on politically.

As names changed so did attitudes people had about themselves and about others - from "colored" to "Negro" to "Black" to "African Americans." Cassius Clay became Mohammed Ali: Lew Alcindor - Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Does "Indian," which represents a rather significant error by a European navigator, really describe the people who have lived here for thousands of years and who are the only Native Americans?

If you get to name the name, you get control as a by-product.

In an attempt to be friendly and personable, the voice on the phone who doesn't know me at all, and asks who I am before allowing me access to the person I am calling, will often address me by my first name. "Thanks for calling, John. He'll get back to you." I'm always a little taken aback by that. So I was pleased to read Madeleine L'Engle - "Names are precious. It used to be a moment of great importance when someone said, 'Oh, don't call me Mr. or Mrs. X, call me Anne or Bob.' My name is a gift which I offer to you. Now the name is taken automatically - grabbed away." [Walking on Water, p. 111]

To love is to call by name, she says, which is certainly part of what is happening when we say out loud these tiny infants' names as they are baptized into the church.

Does it matter what you call God? Yes is does! It matters because our naming of God always has within it the danger of idolatry and the distortion about which the ancient Israelites were so sensitive.

That is the reason gender specific language is such an important issue theologically. Brian Wren, British theologian, poet and hymn writer observes:

> "Images of God must not become idols. However hallowed by tradition, however enriching and suggestive, however profoundly they move us, our metaphors and names for God are not themselves God. We should no more bow down and worship mental and linguistic images of God than the graven images forbidden in the Bible, or the idols of money and success." [What Language Shall I Borrow, p. 108]

"Your God Is Too Small" is the way J. B. Phillips put it. The trouble with the mental and linguistic images that have become traditional and precious to us is that they limit God, and in the limiting distort, and in the distortion - we miss God altogether.

You see if Moses had received the answer he wanted, if he had received a name, "I am the Sun God, Moon God, War-Making God, Love-Making God, Fertility God...," a definition, a creed or theological formula, the pilgrimage, the journey might have ended before it began. Instead, what he received was infinitely more valuable, namely the promise of God's presence in the difficult and challenging and frightening days ahead.

And that's the point of this whole exercise. What I need is not a concept of God I can understand, but some sense that as I try to live faithfully into my own future, whatever that holds, I won't have to do it alone. What you need is not an intellectually defensible argument for the existence of God, but some sense that the one who made you, will come to you in your wilderness, or your escape, or your search, or whatever you are doing here... and will come to you with caring and compassion and love and will be to you and for you what you need God to be.

Does it matter what you call God? Yes it does! It matters that the names you use for God not distort God and in the distortion limit the ways God can come to you. Yes, it matters to those who use the name Christian, that God's name correspond with the life of the one who contained all of God we ever need to know.

Does it matter what you call God? Yes... And yet, because we are now talking about what you call God in the privacy of your heart, your personal relationship with the one who made you and prays to be with you, the one whose name you speak in your most intimate prayers, it doesn't matter because that voice in the wilderness invites us to complete the sentence out of our own experience and out of our own need.

I am...

I will be...

James Forbes, Pastor of The Riverside Church in New York City, put it as eloquently and theologically accurately as I have ever heard it:

> "God said -
>
> - if you need someone to care for you, to nurture you, to give you a sense of dignity and worth, I am your mother,
>
> - if you need grace, love, kindness and provisions, I am your father,
>
> - if you need someone to talk to, to tell your secrets, your burdens, your joys, your sorrows to, I am your sister,
>
> - if you don't have a brother, I am your brother,
>
> - if you have nobody to care for you, to meet you where you are, I am your lover.
>
> - if you are friendless, I am your friend, and I'll stick by you."

God has no name.

God has many names.

When Moses and Jacob ask, they do not receive an answer. It is an intentional omission, we believe. Because they both receive and believe and trust the promise of God's blessing, God's presence in the future.

God invites you, out of your experience and your need, to use a name...

> Father, Mother, Friend, Brother, Sister,
> Lover, Servant, Savior, Liberator...

and to know, as God's people have always known, that the great "I am" is also the promised one who "will be," always, that "Yahweh" means -

> "I will be with you and I will be for you what you need. I will be with you as you free the slaves... as you confront the challenges of your life... I will be Yahweh. I will be God. I will be - with you - always, forever, world without end."

Amen.